

By Their Fruits You Shall Know Them

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All throughout the Bible, both the Old and New Testament, we are repeatedly warned that we should be on guard so not to be deceived by false teachers. Or not be led astray by strange doctrines, following other gods or by going away from God's Word and being led off into the weeds, you might say. We have our responsibility as church members to do our due diligence in testing things to prove whether things are true. But Christ also gave us some warning signs. He gave us a criterion to spot red flags so we could spot false teachers that we should be aware of and steer away from them.

What we're going to do today in this sermon is look at this particular subject. It is our responsibility to be on guard against being deceived by false teachers. Not only look at our responsibility to diligently be studying the Bible and proving whether things are true, but to also understand a little more of the criteria that Christ gave us to spot red flags so that we can spot the signs of false teachers who we can be leery of and steer away from. If you would like a title for this sermon, it's:

By Their Fruits You Shall Know Them

In both the Old and New Testaments, we are repeatedly warned to be on guard, to be watchful and not to be deceived by false teachers. Christ told us this was going to be a problem as we got closer to the end time. We are going to Matthew 24 and we're going to quote directly from Christ's Words. We'll start reading in verse 11.

Matthew 24:11-13 *Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.*

12) And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.

13) But he who endures to the end shall be saved. (NKJV)

I have to admit that for much of my life, I think I was like a lot of the members of the church of God for many years. I would read over these verses thinking of it in an end time context, and thinking "Yes, most of the world has been deceived by false religion. All the religions of the world have led the majority of mankind astray." That is certainly true, but we don't think of it in terms of what Christ was really saying. What He's really warning us is for those of us who have been called—the firstfruit Christians—to be on guard and not be deceived by false teachers. That's what He's really talking about. The way we can tell that is, it says in verse 12 that "*lawless will abound, the love of many will grow cold*". If you look up the Greek word that is translated as *love*, you'll find it's *agape*. This is the spiritual form of love that we receive through God's Holy Spirit. The only people capable of having their *agape love* grow cold are those who had *agape love* in the first place. So, we're talking about firstfruit Christians who have been called to salvation. Verse 13 confirms that for us as well. It says, "*He who endures to the end shall be saved*". The only people who can endure to the end and be saved are those who have been called to salvation in the first place. So obviously what Christ is

intending here is a warning for us, as Firstfruits Christians to not be deceived and get drawn away after false teachings.

It says *many false prophets will rise up and deceive many*. If you're like me, for much of my life I would look at that and when you think of false prophets, you think of people who are claiming they know when the end is going to come. They are making predictions about the future; they are telling you they figured out when Christ is going to return. Or they are claiming to be one of the two witnesses and they know where the place of safety is or things of that nature. The meaning of this could include that, but there is another application which I think is more relevant to most of us. More often we get deceived by things that are false teachers, not necessarily those who are claiming to be prophets. To understand what Christ was getting at here, let's look at the Greek word that is translated as *false prophets*. It's transliterated into English as *pseudoprophetes*. It's [Strong's #5578](#) and the definition I'm going to give you comes from [The Complete Word Study of the New Testament](#) by Spiros Zodhiates. He defines this word as *a false prophet*; "one who falsely assumes the work of a prophet when pretending to foretell things to come", or—here's the more relevant part—"teaching false doctrines in the name of God."

I think we are more likely to get sucked into someone who is teaching false doctrine in the name of God than necessarily someone who is claiming to be a prophet or one of the two witnesses and can foretell the future. That can be a problem as well, but I think we are more likely to get sucked into to someone who is making false teachings in the name of God.

Peter also warned us about this. Just to emphasize we are not just talking about the churches of the world; this is an issue for us in the church of God to be aware of. In 2 Peter 2:1 it's very clear as we read this, we see exactly what Peter is talking about.

2 Peter 2:1-3 *But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.*

2) And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.

3) By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. (NKJV)

It's very clear, just reading Peter's word, he's not just saying those people in the world are being deceived by false teachers, he is saying this is going to happen in the church of God. You're going to have false teachers rise among you and they will deceive many. This won't be a small problem; it will be a major issue. It's something we should all be on guard and watchful of, that we don't allow ourselves to be deceived and get sucked into this. It's important to realize that God purposefully allows this to happen as a test for us. It's not just a coincidental thing that happens, God purposefully—for a very specific reason—allows these things to happen because He wants to test us to see how diligent

we will be and how we will respond. To see this, look at 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul mentions this very thing.

1 Corinthians 11:19 *For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you. (NKJV)*

It mentions in the New King James Version, *factions*, and you will notice in some other Bible translations, it has the word *heresies*. *Heresies, factions, false teachings*—this must be an issue we will have to deal with and why is that? For God to test us. For those who are approved and made manifest. In other words, God allows these situations to come about and to happen, to see how we respond to them. To see who passes the test and who fails the test. This is something that Moses warned Ancient Israel about as well. In Deuteronomy 13, we will see where Moses addressed a very similar thing.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 *“If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder,
2) and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’—which you have not known—‘and let us serve them,’
3) you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.
4) You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him.
5) But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst. (NKJV)*

As I mentioned, God creates these situations, He allows this to happen, specifically as a test to see what we will do. For those of you who have been in the church for quite a while now—I know some of you hearing this are more recently coming into the church of God, but for a large portion of our audience, they will remember back in the Worldwide Church of God and in the early to mid '90's when there was a lot of heresy being brought into the church. If you experienced that, if you think back to that time, what you probably remember seeing is a lot of people—a lot of us in the church of God in general—who had gotten into a habit of going through the motions. Showing up for services on the Sabbath, fellowshiping and going along but not really diligently studying like we should. Then all of these strange teachings started being introduced into the church and what you found over time was, a number of people who had gotten into the mode of church being a social club and a culture of friends and things that they were enjoying in day-to-day life and not necessarily diligently studying. They took the easy route and went along with the crowd and with the changes. They said, *“Great, now we can keep Sunday and we don't have to keep the sabbath anymore and we can eat unclean meats and keep Christmas and doesn't this sound easy?”* They went along with

it. There were many other people who woke up and started digging into their Bible to see if this was really true. They started realizing that what's being introduced wasn't right, it was wrong and they took a stand against it. If you see that situation, that illustrates for you why God allows these situations to happen. They test us.

I remember back around the time when all of this was happening, I heard a long-term minister in the church who made an observation that I thought was very profound. It really summed up the situation. He was talking, not only about the events that happened at that time in the church, but just general principles whenever there are controversies that stir the pot, whether that is with doctrine or other issues. He made the comment that, often when these things happen in the church, you'll find generally speaking there are two kinds of people. There's one kind of person who when things like this happen, the first thing they reach for is their telephone because what they want to know is what their friends think about the situation. Then there's another kind of people and when issues like this happen, the first thing they reach for is their Bible. The first thing they want to know is what God thinks about this situation. That is something we need to take to heart as well. Particularly when it comes to this issue of sorting out false teachers and being aware. We need to be like the Bereans who we see in the book of Acts when they dealt with Paul. They were like that second group of people who first reached for their Bible. Let's go to Acts 17 and look briefly at the example of the Bereans. We're just going to read a couple of verses, but to set the scene, Paul comes preaching that Christ is the Messiah. He is the Messiah who is prophesied in the Old Testament and you need to accept Him as your Savior. This was controversial teaching at this time, this got a lot of people stirred up. It got folks wanting to stone him. Other times Paul was running for his life because he was teaching this. But the Bereans had a different response to this.

Acts 17:10-11 *Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.*

11) These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, [because the folks in Thessalonica had a violent reaction to him] had in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. (NKJV)

Notice what their reaction to this was. They didn't just say, Paul said it so it must be true and then just follow along with it. They also didn't have the reaction of, that's not what I always thought so it must be wrong. They heard Paul out and said, we'll hear what you have to say but then we're going to reach for the Bible. Then we're going to diligently search the scriptures to see if what he is saying matches scripture. We are going to diligently study and prove it all out and see if it's accurate. That's the kind of people we need to be. To make sure that we are diligently studying and researching issues to make sure that we are on track. Does it actually match scripture? If it doesn't, then you reject it and that's how the Bereans responded.

“We’ll go check out what Paul has to say and if it matches scripture then we’ll follow it, but if not, we will cast it aside because we have a problem if it doesn’t match scripture.”

That’s the reaction and responsibility we have when it comes to making sure we are being diligent and following God’s Word.

As I mentioned in the introduction, on this subject, Christ gave us a criterion on how we can spot false teachers. A way to spot red flags you might say. In addition to the responsibility of searching each and every issue, proving from scripture whether it’s true or not, He gave us a criterion to look at and so be able spot red flags and determine whether this is somebody I should avoid, someone whose teachings I shouldn’t follow because they have red flags all over them. Let’s notice what that is. In Matthew 7 and we’ll see the criteria that Christ laid out that we should take to heart. This is a way, in addition to searching out individual issues to see if they are true, a good way to spot red flags of someone whose teachings you don’t want to follow or hang around. Matthew 7:15.

Matthew 7:15-20 *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*

16) You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

17) Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

18) A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

19) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

20) Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (NKJV)

Notice that Christ specifically said that the criteria we should look for are *fruits*. By examining the *fruits* is a way to spot those red flags. We are going to spend some time today looking at what that means and what the Bible tells us what the *fruits* are and specific examples that we should look at. First, I want you to notice His opening statements. He says to be aware of *false prophets* or *false teachers*, again the *pseudoprophets* that I gave you from Matthew 24. That’s the same word used here in Matthew 7. He’s not just talking about those who claim they can foretell the future or claiming to be one of the two witnesses or that type of thing. It’s also those individuals who come teaching false doctrines in the name of God. He goes on in verse 15.

15) ... who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. (NKJV)

One of the reasons I point this out, I talked about when you can spot red flags and want to avoid these individuals. Think of it like this: The Bible refers to God’s people—the Firstfruits He is working with—as His sheep; like sheep following their shepherd. It compares false teachers to ravenous wolves. Think of it in terms of that analogy. If you’re a sheep, a wolf is someone you want to make a point of staying away from. If you’re a sheep and you continue to hang out around wolves, what should you expect to

happen? You should expect to be dinner. Wolves devour sheep. It's not just an issue of being able to sort out truth from error, point by point—that is something we should diligently do—but when we spot the signs of a wolf, as diligent sheep, we need to get away from it. If you're a sheep and continue to hang out with wolves, you should expect to be dinner. That's what happens, wolves devour sheep.

Notice that Christ said the criteria for how we should sort this out is *fruits*. He also mentions this in Matthew 12, so let's go over and see where He talks about the same principle.

Matthew 12:33-37 *“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit.*

34) Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

35) A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.

36) But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.

37) For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (NKJV)

Again, Christ is making this point that you examine the fruits, because you're going to see good teaching coming from an individual with good fruits, you're going to see good teaching. With bad fruit, there's going to be red flags that you want to stay away from.

What does the Bible define as *fruits*? I know all of my life growing up in the church of God, I often heard this lesson of, *“You sort out who to follow and who not to follow by their fruits”*, that's what Christ said and, as we just saw, that is accurate. But often what got pointed to as *fruits* were not the things the Bible refers to as *fruits*. You would hear, *“God only works through this particular organization.”* You would hear this idea being taught in church of God circles. How do you know it's this organization? You look at the *fruits*. But listen to what they called *fruits*. We have the biggest attendance numbers, this television program, this magazine subscription, college campuses, or other various physical things that were going on. That was referred to as fruits. Don't get me wrong, there could be certainly be times where God is certainly blessing the efforts of an organization to preach the Gospel and other things they are doing and those things can be a correlation at times to indicate that God is blessing something. But we do need to understand that those physical things do not meet the biblical definition of *fruits*. We are going to see that *fruits* are directly tied to the Holy Spirit and evidence that God's Spirit is working.

We're going to see that the Bible directly defines *fruits* and they are tied to character traits. It's not just physical things. In Galatians 5 we see what the Bible itself directly defines as *fruits*. We're going to see it gives us what I like to call the good list and the bad list. So we know the positive things to look for and we know the warning signs that we see as red flags to avoid.

Galatians 5:19-26 *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20) idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21) envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23) gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24) And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25) If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. 26) Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*
(NKJV)

The list that he puts out as *positive fruits* are all character traits that are produced through God's Holy Spirit. Not only having God's Holy Spirit but being led by it and yielding to it; these are evidence that that's taking place. What we call the works of the flesh are just carnal human nature running wild. This becomes evidence as to whether God's Holy Spirit is leading a person's mind. Whether they are yielding to it and utilizing it in their daily life, is what this is getting at. This is why He specifically says, if you want to know who to follow and who to not to, you look at the fruits. You don't just look at physical attributes as to what an organization is doing, you look at these character traits.

The issue is, when you think about teachings that you're trying to follow from the Bible, trying to follow doctrine from the Bible, why do we do that? Because we're trying to obtain the Kingdom of God. We're trying to learn things that are profitable in living our lives God's way, so we can wind up in His Kingdom. Notice when he listed out the *works of the flesh*, He said those who practice these won't be in the Kingdom of God. You can see why Christ would say, when you see the negative fruits, that's who you want to avoid, them and their teachings you don't want to follow. Why would you want to follow the teachings of individuals whose behavior is not going to get them in the Kingdom of God? That's not the objective you're trying to achieve.

There's also a basic correlation here. Good sound teaching comes from God's Holy Spirit leading someone's mind. What He's trying to get at is the correlation between someone who is yielding and following God's Holy Spirit. You're going to see that evidenced in their character and in how they live their lives. Looking at that will also tell you if they're really yielding to the Spirit of God and really following it in their day-to-day lives. That's a good indication that their teachings are probably inspired by the Holy Spirit as well. We still have to do the due diligence of proving each point as it's taught, but that's a good general guide. We can get confused with this and think, as long as they have the magazine subscription, a television program and all these other physical things, those are *fruits*. No, it's not. As I've joked for years, when you think of it in terms

of a media campaign, what things do you have to have to successfully do the organizational media campaign type of approach, two major things—a large bank account and an understanding of marketing. It's not necessarily by itself any proof of God's Holy Spirit. It could just be the efforts of a physical organization. I'm not saying that God doesn't work through that, many of us were called into the truth through literature we received back in the days of The Worldwide Church of God and the efforts of the World Tomorrow program and things of that nature; I'm not condemning that. I'm saying let's not get confused on what *fruits* are. *Fruits* correlate specifically with God's Holy Spirit.

If we want to sort out who are the solid teachers who we should listen to and who are those with the screaming red flags who are possibly a wolf—here is the criteria. You look for those who are exhibiting the *fruits of the Spirit* in their lives and you look for those red flags of the *works of the flesh* that illustrate this is maybe someone I shouldn't be following.

What I would like to do with the rest of the sermon is go through some of the examples that list the *works of the flesh*. These are those red flags that we need to look for to spot when things are off track and are not being led by God's Holy Spirit. If you see enough of that and you spot wolves, what do you want to do? As a sheep, you don't want to hang around wolves. If you are sheep and continue to expose yourselves to wolves, you should expect to be dinner. That's just a normal expectation. As sheep we don't want to do that, we want to learn to spot those negative flags.

I'm not going to go through all of the list of the works of the flesh because there wouldn't be time for that in a single sermon. I just want to highlight several of the things listed. Most everything I'm going to cover is going to be listed in verse 20. The first one I want to talk about is *idolatry*. Often when we think of *idolatry*, what comes to mind are examples like the golden calf incident in Exodus. We won't go through that specific example but I point that out because that is often times what we think about. It's a blatant example of idolatry, they made a golden calf, this pagan image, they were bowing down and worshipping—it's blatant idolatry.

Oftentimes in the church of God today, that's not the kind of idolatry that we can find ourselves getting sucked into. The idolatry that we can be guilty of is a lot more subtle than that. We have to realize that anything we put into our lives ahead of God—that we think is more important to us than God and gets us off track—can be something we can make an idol out of. We can even take things that God intended for good, that God gave us as a good thing to try and fulfill His will, and we can turn it into an idol and misuse it.

To see a good example of that, look at Jeremiah 7. We'll see an example of Israel literally taking the temple of God—God told them to build the tabernacle and later they had the temple and He gave them specific purposes to do with these. That's where His presence would dwell, where they would come before God to worship Him and sacrifice—and God intended all of this for good. It wasn't an evil thing that they made all of this, they were following His instructions and using the temple and sacrificing there.

But the people then got things out of proportion and got it into their heads that, we have the temple of God—where the very presence of the Creator God lives—and we can go sacrifice there. They got it all twisted up and got to thinking that because we have the temple and as long as we go and show up for services and we regularly sacrifice there, then we are good with God and we can live however we want during the rest of the time. What was happening was they were living a life of blatant sinfulness but because they had the temple and showed up diligently and sacrificed regularly, that made everything okay. But it didn't make everything okay because they weren't living a life of obedience in their everyday lives.

Jeremiah 7:4-15 *Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.'*

5) For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor,

6) if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt,

7) then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

8) Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit.

9) Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know,

10) and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations?'

11) Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the LORD.

12) But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel.

13) And now, because you have done all these works," says the LORD, "and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer,

14) therefore I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh.

15) And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren—the whole posterity of Ephraim. (NKJV)

I can't help in looking at this example, having grown up in the days of Worldwide and having attended both Ambassador campuses that existed at the time with all the nice buildings and stuff that was there, looking back at that today and all of it is gone. Even the organization that still exists doesn't even own that anymore. What had happened in our culture historically was made an idol out of that. As long as we have all these things, then we are following God. Even after the breakup of Worldwide, there were a lot of people who hung onto it. They needed to get the campuses and the items that were there and hang onto all it, as though hanging onto these physical things was somehow meaningful. They didn't seem to realize those were just physical buildings, just physical things that God blessed the church with, but that didn't make us right with God. To be

right with God we have to live a life of obedience and be diligently following Him in our day to day lives. That's a lesson we all have to learn in how we live our lives and how we select who we listen to and who we follow. There are plenty of organizations and individuals out there teaching today that take that approach. Taking some physical thing or their organization or just making an idol one way or another out of something they have, rather than focusing on just following God's Word in our day-to-day life.

We have to realize; we can fall into idolatry simply by making anything in our lives more important than God. Whether that is something like the temple—that God provided as a means to worship Him—if we take that but ignore following God's commandments in our day to day lives, we have things out of proportion and we've made an idol.

The next area I would like to cover is a cluster of some of the points make in Galatians 5:20. Pretty much all of the list that I'm going to break down comes out of that one verse. I'm going to cluster together a couple of points it makes. It mentions *hatred*, *contentions* and *outbursts of wrath*. These are all that combative, angry type of approach and is why I have clustered them all together.

First, I want to mention something. When you see individuals who are driven by *anger* and *resentment*, that is a red flag, not only in terms of false teachings but realizing that this kind of approach can tend to have an infectious, cancerous kind of effect, just rubbing off on us by being around those attitudes. To see what I mean, look at Proverbs 22:24.

Proverbs 22:24-25 *Make no friendship with an angry man, And with a furious man do not go,
25) Lest you learn his ways And set a snare for your soul. (NKJV)*

In other words, it has an infectious aspect to it, where just being around it can rub off and then create more negative character traits for people who are exposed to it. To give a good example of this—I watched this in action about thirty years ago—when I first left the Worldwide Church of God because of the doctrinal changes, I joined another church of God organization at the time, that was trying to teach more faithfully the basic teachings I had grown up with. I joined a congregation of probably about 100 people, which, by today's standards was a large congregation. Back then in Dallas that was a small group. This was a local congregation that had a local pastor and several local elders, but it was a challenging group of brethren. There were a number of folks who attended the congregation that were not necessarily the most balanced individuals. They tended to be more aggressive, angry individuals. There was a whole other thing that played out there that illustrates the point I'm getting at. In the organization that this congregation was affiliated with, there was one of their popular headquarters ministers, and they would often send out tapes from this particular minister and he was known for his sermons turning into angry tirades, where, whatever the issue was, he would somehow turn it into an angry tirade. What you would notice after a while in seeing this in the congregation, it would turn into how it had a negative effect on the congregation after services. There was a local elder in the congregation that I was good friends

with—this was years and years before I was ever ordained—he made an observation one day that I thought was very profound. We were talking about this and asked, have you ever noticed that when you play a sermon from that particular minister, if you watch the congregation afterwards, it's kind of like watching a bunch of teenagers who have been playing too much Nintendo. You can see the age of the reference here, today they would probably compare it more to Xbox or PlayStation or something. His point was, it was like teenagers who have been playing too many video games and afterwards they were edgy and wound up, aggressive and such. He said you can see this in the congregation.

This elder talks to the local pastor and they noticed some of these problems as well and they purposefully made a point of taking several months and making sure they never played any tapes from this headquarters minister. They made sure all the speaking was done locally for a several months and watched the effect it had on the congregation. What you saw play out—I noticed it as well—was a more harmonious, positive atmosphere after services as a result of this. It really illustrated this whole point of not being around an angry person lest you learn their ways because that's what was happening. That negative, angry, attacking approach was wearing off on the people and effecting how they interacted with each other.

Not only can that wear off, the Bible tells us that angry approach tends to correlate with all manner of sin. Turn to Proverbs 29:22.

Proverbs 29:22 *An angry man stirs up strife, And a furious man abounds in transgression.* (NKJV)

If you're seeing someone with outbursts of wrath and seeing that contentious approach, that is a red flag for someone whose teachings—if that is a common theme—that you want to get away from. That is not inspired by God's Holy Spirit, that is inspired by the works of the flesh. If that is how the mind is being led, that is a big red flag. Several years after that event—in the congregation I talked about with the minister who had the angry approach—years later I wound up meeting a long term elder in the church of God who was by his own admission a *contentious* person. When I say *contentious*, let me share with you the meaning of the Greek word that is used in Galatians 5:20. This is where the word *contention* (*variance* KJV) is translated from. It's transliterated into English as *eris* and is Strong's #2054 and I'm going to give you a definition out of Zodhiates. He defines it as "strife, contention, wrangling; metaphorically it means love of strife". In other words, it's someone who loves to fight, who loves controversy, loves stirring the pot, stirring up conflict with other people. That's what it's getting at and is a work of the flesh and is something you want to stay away from.

The reason I mention this is that years after that first example I gave, I happened to meet an elder in the church of God, who, by his own admission—from repeatedly stating this to me over a period of several years—commented how much he loved to fight. One of his favorite quotes was, "*I would rather be in a fight than watching one*". When he would say that to me, he would say it very proudly, like something he was very

proud of that aspect of himself. I remember numerous times scratching my head in amazement and thinking, I'm listening to a long-term minister in the church of God, brag to me how quarrelsome he is. The reason I point that—we won't take the time to go through the qualifications of the ministry in 1 Timothy—but if you read 1 Timothy 3, Paul is telling Timothy that if you want to ordain elders, here's the list of criteria of qualifications you want to look for. The character traits that you want to see in someone who you would place in pasturing God's people and being a teacher. One of the things specifically listed on the list is that he is not *quarrelsome*. That he is not someone that looks for a fight; not someone that looks to stir the pot just for the fun of stirring up conflict. That's something you want to steer away from.

I knew this elder for several years, and over time I watched was this individual walk away from all the foundational teachings that he had lived most all of his life. Things that we would all agree upon as being the foundational teachings of the Bible. I personally think that that love of strife and controversy was one of the things that led him down that road. That's a work of the flesh and not something that is led by God's Holy Spirit. So when you see that type of approach—angry tirades—people who just love to stir the pot just to stir the pot, that's something you want to run from. As I mentioned, we're sheep—the Bible tells us that we are sheep—and if a sheep continues to hang out with wolves, what should they expect to happen? They should expect to be dinner because wolves devour sheep. That's why Christ warned us to look for ravenous wolves.

Another red flag I would like to point out from the works of the flesh is *selfish ambitions*. As I mentioned, most all of this list is coming out of Galatians 5:20. To share with you the meaning of the Greek word, translated as *selfish ambitions*, it's transliterated into English as *eritheias* and Strong's #2052 and from Zodiates, it means "To work for hire; used in a bad sense of those who seek only their own. Contention, strife, rivalry. It represents a motive of self-interest, mercenary interest. It is also meant canvassing for public office, scheming". In other words, those who scheme to promote themselves with a "Look at me, look at me." Attitude in order to get their way.

To give you an example where this occurred in an experience I had, probably going back to the first couple of years that Pacific, as an organization, existed. There was an individual who had been very heavily involved in another church of God organization. If I mentioned the organization, a lot of you would recognize the name. He had been very actively involved in that organization. He had not only been a regular local speaker, according to what he said, he had spoken at Feast sites, he wrote for their publications at their headquarters—the magazines that they send out—he had been very involved in the organization. He got to a point where circumstances happened and he became disenchanted with that organization and later discovered Pacific online. He reached out to us, as he had been listening to some of our sermons and liked what he heard and established a connection with us. The area where this gentleman lived, we didn't have any congregations directly in that area and there was a small group with him that was meeting in his own living room. But within a few hours from where he lived, we had a sizable congregation of about thirty to forty people and there was an elder and deacon who ran that organization. This gentleman who had reached out to us decided he

wanted to visit that congregation, fellowship, and get to know the people. They certainly welcomed him to come over.

After this experience took place—I wasn't there the day this occurred—but I was good friends with the elder and deacon who were a part of that congregation and I asked how the visit went. They both gave me the same type of assessment. In fact, one of them pretty much worded it in exactly what I'm about to say to you. His comment to me was, "I think he's trouble, looking for a place to happen". I asked, why he thought that? He replied that he was giving us his resume from the moment he walked in the door. What they meant by that, it wasn't like he was walking into a job interview with a printed resume—they meant that from the moment he walked in the door on his very first visit with them, he was making sure everybody knew basically what a big shot he was in his prior organization. He's dropping names of this big-name individual and that big name individual and spoke for Feast sites and wrote for publications and had done all these things and basically just bragging the whole time about what he had been involved in. This wasn't just people getting to know each other and sharing their background and these issues tend to come up. He was making a point of, "I'm a big shot, look at me". You could tell this individual was trying to impress everyone in the congregation and it had the opposite reaction.

Both the elder and deacon later told me, "We saw red flags all over the place. We were concerned about this guy getting very involved in the organization." As the next couple of years played out, their assessment turned out to be accurate. We later discovered that this individual was not only doing a lot of self promoting, he was literally vying for Rick's job. I say that because of friends of mine to whom this individual had talked to where he would say things like, "Do you really think Rick is the man for the job?". They could tell he was suggesting "Maybe I should be the man for the job and you should promote me in charge of the organization." He was literally trying to promote himself into that role. He turned out to be "trouble looking for a place to happen". If you just look for those red flags, for that selfish ambition, you can see trouble coming. That's what the elder and deacon were telling me from that initial visit. They said we were seeing the red flags; we thought he was checking the wrong list so we were leery.

Let me give you a biblical example of how bad these situations can turn out. It can get a lot worse than just someone wanting to stroke their own ego. Turn to 3 John verse 9, where John is writing a letter mentioning an individual just like the one I described.

3 John 1:9-10 *I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us.*

10) Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church. (NKJV)

He's beginning to be downright abusive. Let me also read these same verses out of the New American Standard Bible. I like the way it words it a little more clearly.

3 John 1:9-10 *I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.*

10) For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with malicious words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brothers either, and he forbids those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. (NASB)

Notice what happens. He had gone way beyond just “Look at me, I’m a big shot; he’s now abusing the brethren.” He is opposing what John is teaching simply because it’s not exalting Diotrephes. It’s not an issue of, “I don’t think this is biblically accurate or harmful to the brethren”, it’s “I need to be the big shot”. He is promoting himself into this role and it gets to the point where he’s kicking people out of the church, disfellowshipping them for invalid reasons and abusing people to exalt his own ego. You can see how abusive that can get to be if that’s allowed to run rampant. The lesson for us is spotting those red flags. As I mentioned, we always have the responsibility when it comes to teaching based upon the Bible. We always follow the example of the Bereans, regardless of what it is. Even solid, converted people who are well intentioned and sincerely following God, can be wrong. We can all make major mistakes and be totally sincerely wrong with a good heart and just have a teaching wrong. You always want to be like the Bereans and search out the scriptures to see if these things are true. Christ gives us this list that tells us the fruit—Paul gives us the list—but Christ tells us to look for the *fruits*, and we have to be able to spot them, because oftentimes false teachers are ravenous wolves. If we are sheep and hang out with wolves, what should we expect to happen? We should expect to be dinner because that’s what ravenous wolves do.

The last issue I would like to cover out of Galatians 5:20 and is what the New King James Version calls *dissensions*. I think this one is very relevant to our church of God world, today. Personally, I love how the Living Bible translates this, because I think it creates such a clear picture for what we have dealt with so much in my lifetime in the church of God. I’m just going to quote to you word for word how the Living Bible translates it for what the New King James says are *dissensions*.

“The feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own little group”.

How often have we heard that in the church of God in the last several decades. It normally sounds like this:

“God only works through this organization. Those other people might have been legitimately converted but He’s only working through us; He’s only working through this group and if you want to be right with God, you have to be in our group. You have to be making the same decisions that we are.”

This is exactly what Paul is saying is a *work of the flesh*.

Christ Himself dealt with this very attitude with the apostles in Mark 9:38.

Mark 9:38-41 Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us. (NKJV)

Notice that's the problem—he's not following us. As I love to joke: 21st century translation—*He's not in our corporate organization.*

38 continued) ... casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us." [because he's not in our group.]

39) But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me.

40) For he who is not against us is on our side.

41) For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. (NKJV)

Notice what Christ points out to them—he's not doing any harm because notice what the apostles said to Him. "We saw this guy casting out demons in your name". Notice they don't say, "He was casting out demons but he was a fraud". They didn't say that. They said "He is casting out demons *in Your name*. If he's doing it in Christ's name, he recognizes who Christ is, that Christ is the Messiah and if the demons is really leaving these people, then God the Father is backing this up with the power to cast these demons out, so there's nothing illegitimate. They just have one problem; he's not in their group. *We're attacking him, we forbade him because he wasn't in our group.* He wasn't in our corporate organization to put it in modern day terminology. We need to be aware of that and to realize that this mentality, which unfortunately is extant in the church of God, is a carnal red flag of the *works of the flesh*.

Paul addressed this in 1 Corinthians as well. I love how Paul covers this. He really shows the carnality of it all. Often when you find people making this argument that *God only works through our organization* and if you want to be right with God you have to be following us or this particular minister or be part of this group and when you ask them why, some version of the answer they're going to give you is:

"We are the spiritual giants; we are the most converted and the most on track".

Paul had a different take on this.

1 Corinthians 1:12-17 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."

13) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

14) I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

15) lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.

16) *Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.*

17) *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. (NKJV)*

In other words, if you just think of this in modern day terminology. We don't say, "I'm of Paul or Apollos" we're saying, "I'm in this church of God organization or I'm in that church of God organization, God only works with this one and not that one." It's the same argument. It's the exact same thing, we just put it in different terms.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul addresses this again.

1 Corinthians 3:1-4 *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.*

2) *I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;*

3) *for you are still carnal. [Notice the evidence of why he thinks they are carnal] For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?*

4) *For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? (NKJV)*

In other words, Paul is directly saying, *"This isn't evidence that you are the most righteous or most on track, this is evidence that you are the in the worst shape. This is evidence that you are the ones who need to repent the most, if you're going down that road."* This is an attitude that is extant in the church of God these days and something that we need to be aware of. Not only rooting it out in ourselves but to be aware that you don't want to follow teachers who push that type of mentality and approach. What are you seeing? You're not seeing evidence of the *fruits of the Spirit*; you're seeing the *works of the flesh*. Those who are consistently following the *works of the flesh*, what does that say? They won't be in the Kingdom of God. Why would you want to follow the teachings of someone whose behavior is not leading them to the Kingdom of God? Isn't that why we look to learn God's Word? Isn't that why we look to teachers to teach us to gain more insight into God's Word so we can live this way of life and do what? Wind up in the Kingdom of God, because that is the end goal. We don't want to spend our time listening to and following teachers who are not leading us in that direction. This whole mentality is poisonous. What does this lead to? It leads to the idea that:

"We've got it all together because we're the apple of God's eye and it's just those folks in other groups who need to repent and straighten their lives out because we're good. We have it all worked out and we just need to slide into the Kingdom of God from here. Those other folks need to wake up and come be with us."

That is by definition the Laodicean mentality.

Revelation 3:14-17 *"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write,*

These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

15) *'I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.*

16) *So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.* [Other translations say, I'm about to vomit you out, I'm about to eject you out of the body, out of the body of Christ.]

17) *Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—* (NKJV)

If we allow ourselves to slip into that mentality of, we have it all together. We're the apple of God's eye and those other blind folks just need to wake up and do what we're doing. Then we have stopped looking to change our own lives, we have stopped looking to overcome ourselves. We can't let ourselves get complacent and think, all we have to do is hang on and slide into the Kingdom of God. No, we have to keep growing and repenting and changing ourselves. Constantly examining our own lives to see where we fall short and what we need to change in areas where we need to grow.

I've gone through this to try and point out some of the red flags that Paul gives us in his list of the *works of the flesh*. Christ warned us to be on guard for false teachers. We're repeatedly told throughout the Bible that there are going to be false teachers. It's not just something the world has to worry about, it's going to happen within the church of God. It will affect the many—the Bible directly says that. The Bible also directly tells us that God purposefully allows this to happen as a test for us. He wants to see what kind of people we are. To use the story that I used earlier in the sermon—are we the kind of people who, when issues come up, the first thing we do is reach for the telephone because we want to know what all our friends think? Or are we the kind of people who when issues come up, the first thing we do is reach for the Bible because we want to diligently study and see what God thinks and we want to make sure we are following Him. That's what we need to be doing so that we can sort this out and make sure that we're on track and we're not following the wrong people.

As Christ laid out for us, another very good tool is to examine the fruits—to look at the behavior traits. The whole question is, you want to be following individuals whose mind is being led by the Holy Spirit. That is evidenced not by magazine subscriptions or attendance numbers or big corporations—all of those can be evidence God is blessing what an organization is doing—but what you want to see are the *fruits of the Holy Spirit* and how people behave. You want to see behavioral traits that check off the good list. The good list being those fruits of God's Holy Spirit. You want to avoid those who check off the bad list, the *works of the flesh*. If we practice this in our day to day lives and pay attention to those works of the flesh and use that as a screening criteria and when you see evidence of that—and I don't mean someone who occasionally slips and makes a mistake and errs in one way or another, we all do that—but if you are seeing a consistent track record of the *works of the flesh* in someone who is a teacher, you don't want to follow that person. Christ warned us to examine the fruits and He also told us

that false teachers are analogous to ravenous wolves. As we go forward in our Christian lives, let's make sure we learn the lessons of what Christ has laid out for us and examine the fruits because we're sheep and if sheep continue to hang out with wolves, they should expect to be dinner.